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Exploring the Enduring Insights of Aristotle's Rhetoric in Contemporary Advertising

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of advertising from ancient times to the present day, examining its role in capturing attention and influencing consumer behaviour. Beginning with early Babylonian signs and progressing through the Gutenberg press era to today's digital age, advertising has adapted and expanded its techniques while maintaining core principles of persuasion rooted in Aristotle's theories of ethos, pathos, and logos. The study highlights how advertisements leverage emotional appeals, logical arguments, and credibility to shape consumer perceptions and preferences. It also discusses the blurred boundaries between advertising, public relations, and propaganda, emphasizing the importance of media literacy in navigating modern advertising landscapes. Individuals can make informed decisions amidst pervasive and influential advertising messages by understanding these historical and contemporary strategies.

Keywords: *Rhetoric, Persuasion, Ethos, Pathos, and Logos*

Introduction

From ancient times to modern multimedia, advertising has always been about capturing people's attention and creating the desire for a product. It is a story of exaggeration and exploitation that dates back to the Aristotelian time. The word "advertisement" was initially meant to 'notify, ' but has evolved into much more. It is a way to subconsciously influence consumer behaviour by using images and words.

The history of advertising is long and rich, with examples of ancient advertising discovered by archaeologists. “Babylonian signs advertising wine for sale dating back 3000 years have been found, as well as ads from the first century A.D. on the walls of companies promoting political candidates, theatre performances, sporting contests, and taverns. Criers, Dammars, and signs are were also used as walking and talking advertisements in Ancient Greece, heralding the arrival of ships and exciting goods. These advertisements were accompanied by musicians producing the first commercials. During the Middle Ages, a merchant class emerged, but advertising was still limited to signs and criers.” (Tungate, 2015, p. 34) “The invention of the Gutenberg press in 1448 transformed society and significantly impacted advertising. The rise of literacy led to increased demand for goods and services and, thus, advertising. Books were the first great subject of advertising, with the first printed English language advertisement appearing in 1480, promoting the availability of a book of religious verse.” (SAMPSON, 2021 p. 30)

Printers throughout Europe were suitably impressed with the idea. Soon, selling all kinds of goods, like tobacco and tea, began appearing. Soon, the bills became so numerous on the streets of London that competitors tore down each other's ads. The practice led to the first advertising code in history. "Printers agreed that ads could remain posted for two weeks. The printing press enabled advertising to conquer the streets of London, nearly the first victory on its way to dominating all mass media with its messages to buy."

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(Tungate, 2015 p. 45) In Indian contests, the origins of Indian advertising can be traced back to the Hawkers, who used loud cries, slogans, and sounds to attract customers. During the independence era, the target audience was the British. "After the demolition of the Princely States, the middle class emerged, and the focus shifted from luxury to durable goods. Print advertising in India can be traced back to classified ads, with ads first appearing in printed words in Bengal." (Singh, 2021 p.32)

Throughout history, selling has been about capturing the attention of people with goods or money to spare. From the ancient phrases etched in stone to today's cutting-edge multimedia commercials, the goal has always been the same: to move the product, find the means, tap into desire, and create a need. The current paper concerns persuasion, proclamation, exaggeration, and exploitation. The paper tries to give a panoramic account that spans from the Greek time to contemporary online and social media advertisements.

One of the intriguing aspects of advertisement is the viewer in the illusion that it is directed just to him or her. Nothing is more narcissistic than to think that somebody cares about you. We encounter thousands of advertisements on T.V., smartphones, radio, buses, hoardings, and supermarkets daily. They are on floors, shelves and almost everywhere. We cannot avoid them. Corporate companies spend billions of dollars on advertisements. Products are produced in the factories, but the brands are produced in the consumers' minds, so in many cases, brands have more value than the product. Companies want to be an essential part of customers' memory and imagination. Companies produce products to cater to the consumer's needs; if there are no needs, advertisements create artificial needs. Persuasion is a crucial technique in advertising, and centuries back, Aristotle gave us the theory of persuasion in his treatise Rhetoric.

Aristotle's Theory of Rhetoric

Aristotle's treatise on rhetoric, over 2000 years old, is still relevant today. Many of his core principles can be seen in contemporary advertisements as well. "Aristotle's Rhetoric is centred around the fundamental concept that there are three 'technical' *pisteis*, which are essentially persuasive tools or methods of persuasion. Persuasion is achieved by either the speaker's character (êthos), the emotional state (Pathos) of the listener, or the argument (logos) itself." (Rhet. III.1, 1403b, p. 10–13). Deliberative rhetoric envisions the possible outcome of a new law or a change and focuses on the future. We can see the use of this deliberative rhetoric in many political leaders' speeches and advertisements, which primarily sync with selling their products through this technique, which shows the bright future ahead or otherwise. In other words, it is about the desired world that makes the consumer buy their product to better their future. Aristotle identified three persuasive appeals, namely Ethos, Logos, and Pathos. Ethos is about establishing credibility with the audience; Logos is about using logic and reasoning to persuade, while Pathos appeals to the audience's emotions to make our deliberative rhetoric effective. Advertainments use these appeals in a balanced way.

Products are made in factories, but brands are created in the minds of consumers. Nike's advertising is a prime example of using Ethos effectively. Their ads feature the voice of Colin Kaepernick, an American football player known for his civil rights advocacy. Kaepernick took a stand against racial injustice and systemic oppression in the United States by kneeling during the national anthem, which led to him being sidelined from the sport and drawing criticism from figures like Donald Trump. Kaepernick's significant sacrifices lend credibility to his message. When he says, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything," it suggests that if consumers trust Kaepernick's integrity, they can also trust Nike as a brand.

The following example of Gillette's advertisement highlights Aristotle's Pathos aspect. The ad starts with the scene where the father teaches his son how to shave for the first time. However, there is a twist: the son in the ad is transgender activist Samson Bonkeabantu Brown. This moment becomes deeply meaningful when Samson's dad reassures him not to be scared. The ad highlights that it is not just about shaving but about the broader challenges of life as a trans man. Similarly, the charity sector has long understood the power of Pathos. People feel compassion when they see others experiencing poverty and lacking access to

clean water. Charities often use emotive voice-overs to evoke empathy and inspire audiences to donate money.

As mentioned earlier, Logos means 'word' in Greek, from which we get 'logic.' Aristotle refers to logos as 'reasoned discourse' or 'the argument.' Instead of appealing to emotions, logos use evidence, statistics, and common reason to persuade by presenting complex data and facts brands like Apple position their products as the logical choice for discerning gadget lovers. In the food and drink industry, some ads use voice-overs to highlight how and why their products are healthy, mentioning the percentage of ingredients like sugar. For example, breakfast connoisseur Kellogg's used a straightforward, logical argument to convince parents that its new product is suitable for little teeth: it is just as delicious but now with 30% less sugar.

Most of the ads balance all three persuasive elements. All three elements are necessary for a successful argument. This understanding will inform and prepare you for effective persuasion as they complement and correct each other. For instance, a highly emotional public service announcement about adopting dogs may show tears and cages (Pathos). However, it must also make logical sense (logos) and establish trust (Ethos) to be effective. Another example, in toothpaste advertisements, directors often use a combination of these appeals to persuade the audience to buy their product. They establish Ethos by featuring relationships like mother and child or using dental experts and doctors to make their claims credible. They appeal to Pathos by showing a mother giving toothpaste to her child, creating an emotional connection with the audience. Additionally, they cover the logical aspect of their argument by featuring scientifically proven studies to support their claims.

Arguments gain more persuasive power when Ethos, logos, and Pathos collaborate. This framework acknowledges and respects the intricate nature of human motivation and decision-making. Relying solely on one aspect is likely to be ineffective. However, recognizing your audience's complexity and appealing to their logic, emotions, and trust can lead to success. This approach will make your audience feel respected and valued, enhancing your persuasion's effectiveness.

For example, while people often say facts and logic are enough to make a good decision, presenting heaps of data and irrefutable proof will only achieve a little if no one cares. Without giving your audience a reason to care, they will not listen. Facts alone will not help if your audience suspects manipulation. It would help to use Ethos to establish your credibility and logos to show your reasoning. Similarly, if your emotions are logical, your audience will empathize and trust you.

These three persuasive techniques reinforce each other. When used balanced, they fortify your argument and encompass the full spectrum of human decision-making factors. Overemphasizing one at the expense of others will be ineffective. Use Ethos, logos, and Pathos appropriately and in balance to gain your audience's trust and engage their hearts and minds. This will enable you to achieve meaningful and important outcomes together, fostering a sense of engagement and trust.

Persuasion is a part of our daily lives, and we encounter it in various forms, like ads, sales pitches, or even recommendations from friends. While some messages might convince us, others might not, and it is crucial to know how we respond to persuasion. "The Elaboration Likelihood Model (ELM) divides our response to persuasion into two categories: the central and peripheral. The central route involves thoughtful consideration of the message, while the peripheral route relies on quick judgments'." (Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology 2012) Although both routes are essential, we often use the peripheral route, especially when watching commercials. For example, we may attribute credibility to an actor portraying a doctor because she is donning a white coat. However, recognizing which route we are taking can help us make better decisions.

Several factors can influence our route, including our personality traits, such as our need for cognition. In the research article "The Very Efficient Assessment of Need for Cognition: Developing a Six-Item Version," the author uses the Item Response Theory (IRT) method to argue that "individuals with a greater inclination towards cognition tend to exhibit a heightened level of attentiveness to arguments.

Conversely, those with a lesser inclination tend to rely on rapid cues such as the speaker's legitimacy. Studies have shown that people with a higher need for cognition are more likely to take the central route, while those with a lower need tend to take the peripheral route." (Lins de Holanda Coelho, G., H. P. Hanel, P., & J. Wolf, L. 2020, p. 7). Ultimately, being aware of how we respond to persuasion can help us make more informed decisions and ensure that our opinions are based on critical thinking. Researchers also noted that "the individual's situation and emotional state could play a significant role in persuasion. For instance, if someone is distracted or pressed for time, they are more likely to use the peripheral route when making decisions. Emotions can also influence opinions; if someone feels positive emotions towards a product, they are more likely to have a favourable opinion." (Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology 2012, p. 44)

Context plays a crucial role in how emotions affect our decision-making process. Depending on the situation, the same emotion can have different persuasive effects. However, emotions can also make us more susceptible to being convinced without critically analyzing the situation. The credibility and the source of the message also have a significant impact on our perception. According to a 2016 study, "people who read a sponsored product review were more likely to hold negative opinions about the product. This is because we know the reviewer was paid to give a positive review, making us more sceptical." (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 35)

Advertising, Public Relations, and Propaganda

Advertising, Public Relations, and Propaganda are closely related. “An advertisement is a public notice promoting a product, event, or service; creating them is the art of advertising. Brands may create ads themselves or hire companies to do it for them. Public Relations (PR) is different from advertising as it manages the relationship between the public and the brand.” (Jacobsen, 2018, p. 45) PR aims to inform the public about the brand's activities and present the brand in a positive light. It may involve writing an apology for a mistake or generating hype for a new product release. Propaganda involves distributing information to promote a specific point of view, often biased or misleading, to support particular political views. Though these fields seem distinct, the differences between them can be blurred, especially online. In this paper, we will discuss propaganda in more detail.

Creators have the power to make choices at every step of their work, including the purpose of their work, focus, and point of view. Similarly, advertisements follow the same approach, from the short glimpses we see while swiping through our friends' stories to the elaborate trailers that generate as much excitement as the movie itself. Advertisers use centuries of market research to exploit our basic needs, such as food, shelter, love, and belonging, to tap into our desires and make us want to buy things. Edward Bernese, a pioneer in this field, wrote about the human psyche and how individuals can be persuaded to change their habits by following the crowd. His 1929 book Crystallizing Public Opinion, which became a classic in public relations, stated that “humans are quick to follow the crowd and are more influenced by the heart's voice than any other factor.” (Bernays, 2019, p.12) To summarize, creators and advertisers use specific techniques to appeal to their audiences, and advertisers have used this approach for decades to persuade people to buy their products.

The desire to fit in is often played upon by advertisements, leading to the rise of trends and fads. Abraham Maslow, a psychologist, established a hierarchy of needs that all humans possess. “It is structured like a pyramid, with the most basic needs, such as food, water, shelter, and sleep, forming the foundation. Safety comes next, followed by the need to belong and feel loved. After that, we crave a sense of achievement and significance. At the very top of the pyramid lies the desire to fulfil our destiny and become the best version of ourselves.” (Maslow 1943, p. 106). Michel asserts that “Maslow's Hierarchy hypothesis was derived from Maslow's direct observations of the Blackfoot Nation, a prosperous and advanced community in which he immersed himself before formulating his theory. Maslow encountered a roadblock in his theory of human development and sought inspiration by immersing himself in the Blackfoot community, which significantly impacted his theory. He extensively borrowed from the Blackfoot people to

enhance his psychology theory on the hierarchy of demands." (Michel 2014) Advertisements use a combination of these needs and our inclination to follow the crowd to influence our decisions. Their aim is to trigger the right response, usually resulting in a purchase. Most modern ads pitch their product as the solution to our needs. For instance, security systems promise to cater to our basic instinct of safety. Some products even claim to satisfy multiple needs further up the pyramid.

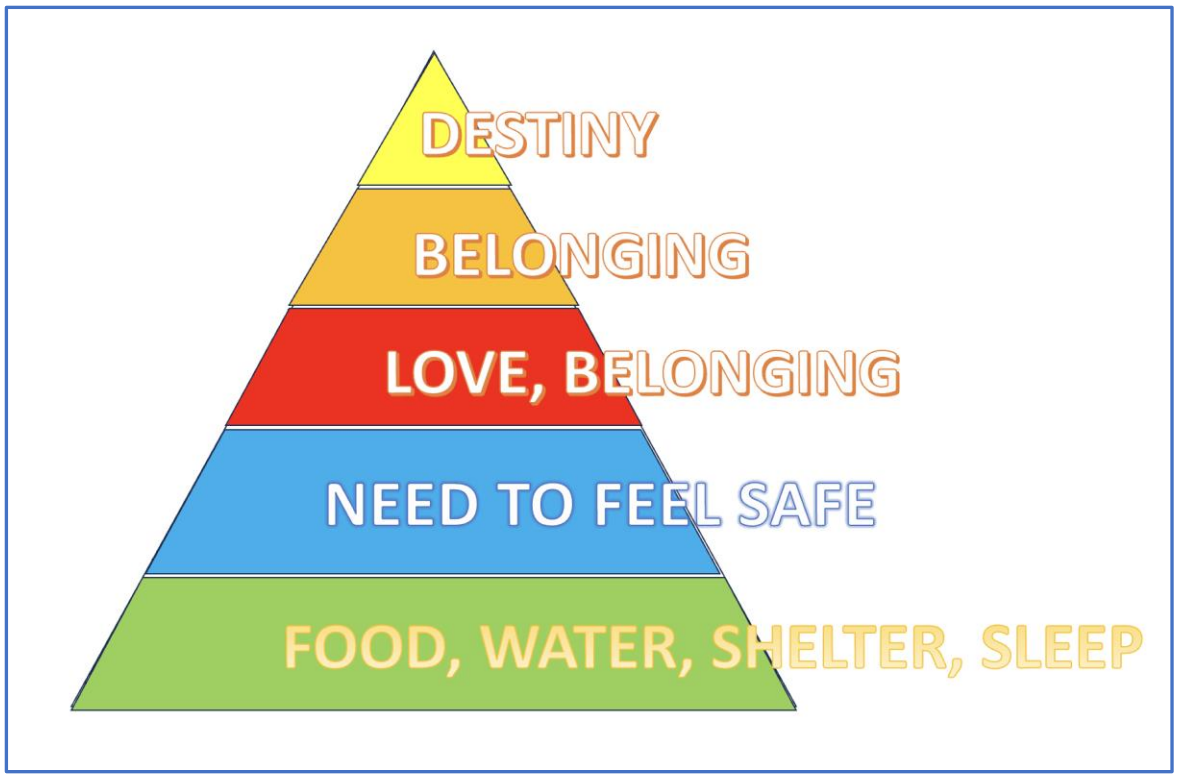

Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is typically represented as a pyramid.

Check out this vintage hair dye advertisement featuring Laurel's iconic slogan, 'Because you're worth it.' The slogan has been used since the 1971 ad and still resonates with our human needs. Although the hair dye may be the most expensive in the country, the ad appeals to both our desire for luxury and our need for individualism. The ad appeals to our desire to stand out and be unique by implying that natural hair colour is boring. It also appeals to our need to feel valued and worthy. The ad is saying that you deserve the most expensive dye because you are worth it and implies that the product will make you feel hot and the best. The appeal to the middle and top of the pyramid is genius as it appeals to our desire to become our best selves and rise above the rest. If you've ever treated yourself to a pair of designer shoes after a long day, you've fallen into this attraction.

When persuading people, several key factors come into play. The first is authority. If the speaker is perceived as an expert, their message will likely be believed. For example, ads often mention that toothpaste is recommended by 4 out of 5 dentists, making people more likely to trust the recommendation. Another important factor is likability. People are more inclined to listen to someone they like or trust, so brands frequently use celebrities to promote their products. Consistency is also crucial. If the message aligns with people's beliefs, they are more likely to accept it as true.

However, these persuasive techniques can also be used in misleading ways. Advertisers often use emotional appeals to convince people to take action, even if the logic behind the claim is flawed. For instance, a commercial featuring sad dogs and a sentimental song might convince people to donate to a certain charity, even if that charity is not actually effective in helping animals. So while it's important to be aware of these persuasive tactics, it's also important to think critically and evaluate the evidence behind a claim before making a decision.

One common fallacy is the false dilemma, in which limited options are presented to prevent consideration of other choices. Another example is the use of a Red Herring, "which involves presenting irrelevant information to divert attention from the main issue. These techniques are frequently used in politics and advertising, with varying effects. While public service campaigns can encourage positive behaviours, cosmetic ads can have negative impacts on young people's self-image." (Danciu, 2014, p. 32) Developing media literacy skills to recognize these persuasive techniques and make informed decisions is important.

Conclusion

Advertising has evolved significantly from its ancient beginnings to today's sophisticated, multimedia-driven industry. Despite changes in technology and media, the core principles of persuasion have remained remarkably consistent. Aristotle's ancient ethos, pathos, and logos theories underpin modern advertising strategies, reflecting a timeless understanding of human psychology and decision-making. Throughout history, advertisements have tapped into basic human needs and desires, utilizing emotional appeals, logical arguments, and credibility to influence consumer behaviour. From the cries of hawkers in ancient markets to the targeted ads on social media, the goal has always been to capture attention and drive action.

In today's world, where advertisements are ubiquitous and unavoidable, it is crucial for consumers to develop media literacy skills. Understanding the techniques used in advertising, both ethical and manipulative, can empower individuals, giving them a sense of control over their decisions and reducing their susceptibility to superficial appeals.

Moreover, the convergence of advertising, public relations, and propaganda blurs the lines between information and persuasion, making it even more critical to critically evaluate the messages we encounter. By being aware and critically evaluating these messages, we can reduce the likelihood of being influenced by deceptive tactics. As advertisers continue to innovate and adapt to new media landscapes, the fundamental principles of Aristotle's rhetoric remain relevant, providing a framework for understanding and analyzing the art of persuasion.

In conclusion, while advertising will undoubtedly continue to evolve, its essence as a tool for persuasion will endure. By recognizing and understanding the strategies employed, we can navigate the sea of advertisements with a discerning eye, making choices that align with our actual needs and values rather than being driven by artificial desires created by the industry.

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